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REASONABLE MAGIC & MAGICAL REASON: THE PHILOSOPHY OF ROBERT MONROE

by Joseph M. Felser, PhD

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The maverick British philosopher R. G. Collingwood argued that we never struggle with our problems in isolation. Whether we know it or not, he said, our deepest personal challenges are rooted in the common ground of our cultural and social difficulties. No one, after all, is an island.

What is our chief problem? As Bob Monroe observes in *Far Journeys*, it's that we are a "halfbrained society." That half, of course, would be the left side of the brain: our rational intellect. But what about the other half of us—the right brain of feeling, intuition, psychic sensitivity, and imagination? This creatively fertile, "magical" aspect has, by and large, fallen asleep. In psychological terms, this means it has fallen into the unconscious, where it becomes an unknown object of fear and misunderstanding.

Not that there's anything wrong with reason as such, mind you—far from it. As Bob well understood, our power of logical analysis is perhaps our greatest tool. In *Ultimate Journey*, he writes, "Our prime and fundamental purpose, aside from learning through experience in being human, is to acquire and develop what we label intellect: left brain consciousness." It's the rational intellect, he adds, that reduces or eliminates fears, converts Unknowns into Knowns, and clears out the thick mental underbrush of dead and decaying beliefs. How true!

And yet (as Bob would have been the first to admit), when reason, out of fear, refuses to question itself, it stunts its own growth. When our intellect attempts to go it alone, it turns downright pathological. As the Native American writer Joseph Bruchac observes, "When the life of the intellect and the life of the spirit grow apart, terrible things become possible."

Just how terrible can be seen by even the most cursory glance at today's headlines. Writing in the *New Yorker* magazine, journalist Elizabeth Kolbert observes that the global warming situation is so dire that our planet will soon be hotter than at any time since the dawn of human evolution. We may suffer natural catastrophes that produce millions of refugees. She concludes: "It may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing."

Kolbert's warning is echoed by scientist James Lovelock, the father of the Gaia hypothesis (which views Earth as a living organism). Lovelock believes that Gaia is "seriously ill, and soon to pass into a morbid fever that may last as long as 100,000 years." Before the end of the twenty-first century, he argues, global warming will bring about the collapse of civilization, the deaths of billions of humans, and the destruction of most of Earth's wildlife.

Folk wisdom says that half a loaf is better than none. Well, maybe not. A "half-brained society" may even be a recipe for a suicidal extinction of the human species on this planet. Something essential is indeed missing. And we'd better find it in a hurry—before it's too late.

Against this backdrop, our individual quests to harmonize our right and left brain functions may seem like selfish, petty conceits. But what I am arguing is precisely the opposite: We do not have the luxury of dismissing our own inner warning systems. Nature is speaking both to us and through us. Our personal search for balance and harmony is the expression of a wider and deeper wave of positive change. After all, we have to start somewhere.

Bob Monroe began in the midst of a deeply personal crisis brought about by his (initially terrifying) spontaneous OBEs. However, it was through his persistent efforts to understand these experiences, and to master his "wild talent" for having them, that he developed Hemi-Sync® and the philosophy that underpins the Hemi-Sync technology.

Bob wasn't an academic philosopher or a theoretician who used a specialized vocabulary. Nevertheless, he did, I believe, employ a coherent and cohesive set of principles that guided his work in the exploration of consciousness. He thought about what he was doing, and he reflected on the meaning of his experiences. These are philosophical tasks.

As I see it, the Monroe philosophy is grounded in two key principles. Expressed in imperative form, they are (1) "Explore everywhere!" and (2) "Question everything!" I will refer to these as the principles of "radical empiricism" and "radical iconoclasm," respectively.

Here I am using the term "radical" in its original (Latin) sense of being "deeply rooted." Bob's philosophical roots are so deeply and closely intertwined as to be practically and theoretically inseparable. Like the Taoist principles of yin and yang, each implies, and complements, the other.

Let's begin with the principle of radical empiricism. My dictionary defines "empirical" as (1) "relying on or derived from observation or experiment"; (2) "verifiable or provable by means of observation or experiment"; and (3) "guided by practical experience and not theory." An empiricist is thus someone who believes that knowledge is based primarily on experience. The more experience we have, the faster our knowledge grows. So it's quite natural and logical that an empiricist is an explorer of new worlds of fact—a patient, but persistent, gatherer of raw data. As the English biologist and philosopher T. H. Huxley famously stated, we should "sit down before fact like a little child" and "follow humbly wherever . . . nature leads."

Of course, as Bob learned the hard way, the attempt to equate "experience" with "physical experience" and "data" with "physical sense data" is not actually supported by our "practical experience." Therefore, this equation (made by many self-described empiricists) is not itself empirically verifiable. It is based on a metaphysical theory whose key (unquestioned) premise is that only physical matter is real and that our only information about this reality comes through the five physical senses (or through physical instruments that amplify their reach).

By giving priority to his actual out-of-body experience over the ideology of materialism, Bob was being more empirical-minded than those scientists and philosophers who put mere theory first. He tested the twin hypotheses of nonphysical experience and perception for himself. When he verified them to his own satisfaction, his previous faith in the completeness and certainty of our scientific knowledge was utterly shattered.

Bob thus came to the conclusion that often comes to those on the cutting edge of physical exploration: The experience of new places calls for new ideas. In encountering the expansive interior landscapes of the new lands of consciousness, he reluctantly admitted that all the standard definitions and old operating rules would have to be scrapped. This was a painful but necessary realization. "The most difficult mental process of all," he writes in *Journeys Out of the Body*, "is to consider objectively any concept which, if accepted as fact, will toss into discard a lifetime of training and experience."

Out of sheer necessity, then, the bold pioneering explorer of inner space became an innovative thinker—an emboldened questioner who would smash any idol of belief that got in his way, no matter how "obvious" its truth or how deeply entrenched the emotional investment of its worship. As Bob so eloquently states in *Ultimate Journey*: "What we need to do, whether in- or out-of-body, is to ignore or tear down the No Trespassing signs, the taboos, the notice that says Holy of Holies, the distortions of time and translation, the soft black holes of euphoria, the mysticisms, the myths, the fantasies of an eternal father or mother image, and then take a good look with our acquired and growing left brain. Nothing is sacred to the point where it should not be investigated or put under inquiry."

This breathtaking rejection of all ideological “sacred cows” poses the most serious challenge yet to our entire culture. It is nothing short of a revolutionary call to philosophical arms.

While Bob’s radical empiricism thus shaded imperceptibly into his radical iconoclasm, the reverse also held true: By engaging his faculty of critical thinking, he was able to sail ever further on into the sea of the great unknown.

A prime example of this comes from *Far Journeys*, where he recounts a key turning point in his quest. It happened in the spring of 1972, when, after having become bored and frustrated with his now routine out-of-body state, he questioned whether his conscious ego ought to be in the driver’s seat. By releasing this tacit assumption and giving over the decision-making process to what he called his “total self,” a whole new dimension of experience and adventure on the Interstate of consciousness opened up.

The “glue” that bound together Bob’s radical empiricism with his radical iconoclasm was his intuitive grasp of a revolutionary new idea: the “holographic model” of mind and reality that is familiar to us thanks to the groundbreaking work of quantum physicist David Bohm and neuroscientist Karl Pribram. The holographic model suggests that the human brain-mind, as well as the universe it cognizes, is structured like a hologram in which each part replicates the plan of the whole. In 1912, R. G. Collingwood had anticipated this view with his affirmation of what he called “the principle of the unity of the mind,” according to which, “each part is the whole.”

Following his pragmatic, engineering sensibility, Bob conceived this holistic unity in terms of “hemispheric synchronization.” As he writes in *Ultimate Journey*: “Peak performance comes when both left and right brain thinking are integrated, unified, synchronous.” However, he says, “The trick is to get both left and right brain into simultaneous and synchronous action, nudging the left brain more and more into taking part in the There activity.” To which he immediately adds, “You should never abandon one for the other.”

This is key. As Bob often emphasized, we must also nudge the right brain into taking part in the Here activity, by making practical use of the subtle nonphysical data we are receiving (but not consciously processing) all the time. Borrowing his favorite metaphor, we could say that the aim of Hemi-Sync is to get the traffic flowing smoothly and evenly in both directions, at once, on the bridges of the Interstate. As Bob notes: “Every single thing we learn [Here], no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential, is of immense value There—beyond time-space.”

This affirmation of the importance and value of the “Here” activity places Monroe squarely in the revolutionary camp of Collingwood, Bohm, and the new (holographic) mysticism. Whereas the traditional mysticism states, “As above, so below,” the new mysticism adds, “And, as below, so above.”

According to the older view, the cosmos is a hierarchy. Mind (or spirit, or consciousness), which creates physical matter, is thus vastly superior to it. The timeless “There” is far more valuable and important than the temporal “Here,” the perfect whole (The One) infinitely more significant than its finite, imperfect parts (The Many).

But the new mystics affirm that reality is a two-way street—a holarchy, not a hierarchy. Thus, what Bohm termed the enfolded, or implicate, order of eternity (“There”) is just as affected by what we experience and do at the unfolded, or explicate, level of time-space reality (“Here”) as we are by what occurs There. Each level needs and feeds the other, and therefore—as Bob implored us—we must never abandon one for the other.

The marriage of magic and reason is therefore essential for the healthy development of both partners. Separated from “magic,” reason is rudderless and bereft of inspiration. Magic, spurned by reason, devolves into a frightful and disruptive alien invader, assuming ever more exotic and threatening poses in order to gain reason’s attention. The result is the proliferation of all sorts of self-mystifying, superstitious, fraudulent nonsense.

Bob consciously demystified “magic” and made it more accessible to reason. By opening the rational side to infusion by the nonrational source of ideas, he planted magical seeds of creativity that may yet help to transform our culture—and perhaps our reality as well.

In the end, the general philosophical principles that underlay Bob’s method of inquiry are more important than the particular metaphysical conclusions he arrived at. For Bob never wanted to be simply taken at his word, like some guru or authority. “Check it out for yourself” was his constant refrain. Through what he termed “personal experience uninhibited by belief systems,” we may yet achieve what he viewed as our greatest goal: “forms of freedom inconceivable to the present consciousness of man.”

[Dr. Felser graciously consented to condense his keynote address at the Twentieth Professional Seminar to fit the TMI Focus format.]

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